

A Hostage Describes John Brown's Raid



ABOUT THE SOURCE Abolitionist John Brown was committed to ending slavery, even if it meant killing. In 1856 Brown and his men executed five pro-slavery settlers in Kansas. A few years later Brown tried to start a slave revolt in Virginia. He and 21 followers seized the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry. However, townspeople and U.S. Marines soon surrounded the building. The raid ended in failure and Brown was captured. The passage below is an account of the raid from one of the hostages taken by Brown's men.



*As you read note how Daingerfield describes John Brown. The following words may be new to you: **trappings, constrained**. You may want to use a dictionary to look them up.*

On Sunday night, Oct. 16, 1859, about twelve or one o'clock, the gatekeeper of the bridge over the Potomac leading into Maryland was startled by the steady tramp of many men approaching the gate, having with them wagons, who, upon reaching the gate, ordered it to be opened to them. This the gate-keeper refused to do. They seized him and, presenting a pistol at his head, compelled him to be silent. They then wrenched off the locks and came over, he thinks about sixty strong . . .

I walked towards my office, then just within the armory inclosure, and not more than a hundred yards from my dwelling. As I proceeded I saw a man come out of an alley near me, then another, and another, all coming towards me. When they came up to me I inquired what all this meant; they said, nothing, only they had taken possession of the Government works.

I told them they talked like crazy men. They answered, "Not so crazy as you think, as you will soon see." Up to this time I had not seen any arms; presently, however, the men threw back the short cloaks they wore, and displayed Sharpe's rifles, pistols, and knives. Seeing these, and fearing something serious was going on, I told the men I believed I would return to my quarters. They at once cocked their guns, and told me I was a prisoner . . .

We were not kept closely confined, but were allowed to converse with him. I asked him what his object was; he replied, "To free the negroes of Virginia." He added that he was prepared to do it, and by twelve o'clock would have fifteen hundred men with him, ready armed . . .

During the day and night I talked much with John Brown, and found him as brave as a man could be, and sensible upon all subjects except slavery. Upon that question he was a religious fanatic, and believed it was his duty to free the slaves, even if in doing so he lost his own life.

The Nation Splits Apart**Primary Source**

During a sharp fight one of Brown's sons was killed. He fell; then trying to raise himself, he said, "It is all over with me," and died instantly.

Brown did not leave his post at the port-hole, but when the fighting ceased he walked to his son's body, straightened out his limbs, took off his **trappings**, then turning to me, said, "This is the third son I have lost in this cause." Another son had been shot in the morning and was then dying, having been brought in from the street. While Brown was a murderer, yet I was **constrained** to think that he was not a vicious man, but was crazed upon the subject of slavery. Often during the affair in the engine-house, when his men would want to fire upon some one who might be seen passing, Brown would stop them, saying, "Don't shoot; that man is unarmed."

John E. Daingerfield

Source: *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (June 1885)

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What did John Brown believe would happen after the raid began?

2. What was Daingerfield's opinion of John Brown?

3. How did Brown demonstrate his dedication to the cause of ending slavery?
